

Implementing a Successful National e-Forum

Abstract

The National 4-H Volunteer e-Forum is an alternative to multistate, face-to-face volunteer forums. Building on the success of regional e-forums, a collaborative group planned and offered three webinars that were relevant, economical, consistent, and convenient to attend. A blended learning strategy can successfully be used for focusing on both volunteer and organizational needs when approached with intentionality. Extension can use this model broadly to develop better trained corps of volunteers. Data-driven recommendations are included for Extension professionals interested in exploring hybrid training options.

Keywords: [volunteer](#), [online training](#), [program planning](#), [blended learning](#), [e-forum](#)

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Introduction

Cooperative Extension programs aim to increase client knowledge and change behavior. Yet meeting the educational mission of the organization means that Extension professionals must do more than deliver information (Wise & Ezell, 2003). Traditionally, Extension entities in states and regions have planned and organized 4-H volunteer forums to provide training and resources to increase volunteers' competencies related to the needs of young people (Culp, 2000). Due to barriers such as time constraints, prohibitive travel distances, limited budgets, and reductions in staffing, Extension entities have begun to experiment with virtual forums.

According to Garst, Baughman, and Franz (2014), "Extension professionals need to be prepared to deliver educational content to individuals and communities using contemporary methods and strategies" ("Introduction" section, para. 2). Adding to the complexity of designing impactful learning experiences, Extension educators are analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of integrating a web-based component as part of the program delivery mode (Chingos, Griffiths, Mulhern, & Spies, 2017; Ge, 2012; Jorm, Kitchener, Fischer, & Cvetkovski, 2010). Embracing disruptive innovation and technology will be required if Cooperative Extension is to thrive in the coming decades (Franz & Cox, 2012). Using distance delivery technology to reach clientele is one example of how a contemporary educational approach can be more efficient than traditional methods (Bowen-Ellzey, Romich, Civittolo, & Davis, 2013; Glang, Koester, Beaver, Clay, & McLaughlin, 2010).

Program Description

The National 4-H Volunteer e-Forum was established for the purpose of incorporating knowledge, experiences, and resources from throughout the national 4-H system into consistent and relevant training for all volunteers. We designed the program to help 4-H volunteers implement the promising practices of positive youth development and enhance their ability to interact effectively with youths. The inaugural event occurred across 3 months—October, November, and December—in 2017. We used ON24, a web-based distance learning platform, to deliver three 90-min modules, one each month, through a blended model that incorporated virtual and face-to-face learning. Volunteers gathered at local Extension offices to view a simulcast webinar and to engage in topic-related hands-on activities led by on-site facilitators. Poll questions and chat boxes allowed participants to share thoughts and learn in real time.

Results

Participants from 38 states convened at 257 unique sites for the inaugural National 4-H Volunteer e-Forum. Although it was difficult to track the total number of participants, 762 individuals completed evaluation surveys. Of these, 77% were adult volunteers, 14% were youth volunteers, and 9% were paid staff members. Participation data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
2017 National 4-H Volunteer e-Forum Participants

Participation variable	October	November	December
States participating	33	34	27
Sites registered	240	231	211
Sites hosting live session	126	112	89
On-demand views of recorded session	62	42	29

Note. Duplicates are included in the monthly sites registered, sites hosting, and on-demand views. Numbers do not indicate the number of unique sites.

Discussion

Attending to recommendations in the literature, we considered that intentionally planning a design and

development process is important to creating quality web-based programming (Robideau & Vogel, 2014) and that planning for unforeseen challenges is a necessity (Lippert, Plank, Camberato, & Chastain, 1998). For example, we addressed the fact that although most presenters had previously hosted webinars, not all were familiar with the features of the ON24 virtual platform or a blended delivery method that included hands-on activities at individual sites. We also drew from more closely related background. During the preceding decade, Extension professionals in various regions had begun to use distance learning strategies to host volunteer e-forums. Therefore, the National 4-H Volunteer e-Forum steering committee conducted a critical analysis of prior regional e-forums to determine best strategies for effectively accomplishing intended outcomes for the inaugural national event. Using technology provided the opportunity to deliver consistent, quality content to a large, national audience. Applying the blended learning concept addressed volunteer preferences for hands-on learning, idea sharing, relationship building, and fun. Moreover, hosting the e-forum at county-based sites not only perpetuated the positive aspects of blended learning but also provided a safe and continuous learning opportunity in case of technology challenges or failure. Table 2 provides descriptions of the components we strategically included to ensure success.

Table 2.

Intentional Design Components

Component	Strategies
E-forum steering committee	<p>A multistate group of Extension professionals representing each region provided structure for the overall operation of the National 4-H Volunteer e-Forum.</p> <p>Committee members coached design teams, provided quality control by editing and formatting materials for consistency, and held design teams accountable by setting deadlines and scheduling check-ins.</p>
Session design teams	<p>Teams of four to six Extension professionals with topic expertise created each of the three e-forum sessions.</p> <p>Members used a storyboard in Google Docs to articulate learning objectives, choose appropriate activities, clarify the presenter roles, and design slide decks.</p> <p>Teams developed scripts to ensure timing parameters, topic alignment, and consistency in terminology (e.g., <i>agent</i>, <i>educator</i>).</p>
Templates for session design teams	<p>Steering committee members created templates to save time and ensure consistency among the three design teams.</p> <p>Templates included planning calendars, storyboards, lesson plans, and PowerPoint slides.</p>
Presenter orientation	<p>A synchronous virtual orientation allowed consistent information to be shared along with</p>

Facilitator guide	Logistical information and tools to help site facilitators effectively prepare for and host e-forum sessions were offered in the guide. Content included downloadable resources, lesson plans, lists of materials needed, evaluation forms, and tips for troubleshooting technical difficulties. (The facilitator guide is available at https://4-h.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2017-e-Forum-Host-Site-Facilitator-Logistics-Guide-Final-8.24.2017.pdf .)
Youth–adult partnership opportunities at host sites	<p>Local site hosts were encouraged to engage teen and adult volunteers in e-forum activities related to the session topic.</p> <p>Youths served as site cohosts, invited their adult partners to participate in the sessions, provided technology support, led icebreakers, and engaged in discussion regarding implementation of ideas gained from the e-forums in their communities.</p>

Recommendations

Building on the experiences of professionals involved with volunteer e-forums in the North Central and Western Extension Regions, we created specific strategies for the national e-forum, but we still encountered challenges. For example, we were aware that Robideau and Vogel (2014) had recommended that content specialists and design team members meet in 3-day retreats with focused collaboration time when transitioning from face-to-face to online education. However, our design team members were unable to meet in person for the recommended time; therefore, they struggled to create lesson plans and maintain momentum. Throughout the process, we collected and analyzed data from the steering committee, design teams, and local facilitators to identify challenges and provide recommendations to enable future planning teams to address issues we encountered (Table 3).

Table 3.

Challenges and Recommendations

Challenge area	Recommendations
Time zones	<p>Organize design teams by geographic region to avoid scheduling across multiple time zones.</p> <p>Establish varied start times for e-forum sessions to allow host sites to choose a time frame that allows for maximum local participation.</p>
Time commitment	<p>Develop specific role descriptions for steering committee and design team members that include time commitments and task descriptions.</p> <p>Provide a timeline with task-specific benchmarks to be met.</p>

Include youth and adult volunteers on the steering committee and session design teams.

Invite volunteers to participate in data collection as a component of the planning process.

Engage volunteers of diverse ages as cofacilitators at local sites.

Orientation webinars for site facilitators

Offer orientation in advance and include a recorded option.

Consider hosting virtual office hours for Q&A sessions.

Technology access in remote or rural areas

Provide backup options such as call-in capability, recorded sessions, and full lesson plans with handouts.

Evaluate platform options early in the process to best meet demands of a variety of technology capacities.

Project rhythm

Schedule meetings consistently.

Use the same meeting platform to ensure the comfort of participants and ease of conducting the meeting.

Schedule milestones to facilitate meeting project deliverables.

Youth engagement

Offer multiple, meaningful ways for youth volunteers to be involved.

Encourage youth volunteers to invite adult volunteers to participate with them.

Ensure that youths are given equitable "airtime" and visibility during group activities and discussions.

Consider youth volunteers' schedules and communication preferences.

Conclusion

The National 4-H Volunteer e-Forum is a collaborative model designed to facilitate (a) provision of consistent training to a national corps of volunteers and (b) reductions in the time and resources needed to replicate efforts in individual states. Using a blended methodology allows for consistent delivery of educational content as well as local face-to-face interaction among volunteers. State specialists can share their expertise without confronting the costs normally associated with face-to-face training. However, the magnitude of such a project can lend itself to ample opportunities for things to go awry. With intentional planning and careful consideration, Extension professionals from any program area may successfully use an e-forum model to reach volunteers across the national Extension system. For example, food safety volunteers could be trained

on date labels and use of "ugly" fruits and vegetables, or master gardener volunteers could receive training on drainage and irrigation. Application of this model across program areas may be used to overcome barriers to current volunteer development and increase volunteer capacity to efficiently and effectively achieve the Extension mission.

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